


ROBERT · BROWNING  
IN · HIS · RELATION  
TO · THE · ART · OF · PAINTING

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## ROBERT BROWNING IN HIS RELATION TO THE ART OF PAINTING.

Within the great kingdom of Art,—that domain of man's spirit wherein he endeavors to reveal Truth,—within this great kingdom of Art abide the arts, each a distinct personality, working in harmony with its own nature, yet in fulfilment of one great idea. They form a high fraternity; and in their service, varied, rich, and enduring, those who are the disciples of Art labor joyfully.

To-day, it is of one only of the arts that I wish to say a few words. To-day, I have the pleasure of speaking, to the Society which represents him in Boston, of Robert Browning in his relation to the Art of Painting, that we may see, so far as may be in the very limited scope of this paper, how deeply, how wisely, and how justly this Poet deals with the Painter. I shall have no word to say of Browning's own art: it does not come within my province to speak of his verse as such, only as it relates itself to my subject, as it explains or illuminates pictures and those who painted them.

In dealing with Art as with Life, Browning is a relentless

explorer, forager, and discoverer. He must know all: he must discern the very nature of things, must feel the elemental pulse, must see under what conditions the type shall be made known, after which curious and subtle investigation he will proceed with dramatic intensity to embody, in individual instances, those persistent forces. Thus, from the beginning, it was not for him to be duped by fancying that the *Ars Poetica* held the key to all other arts, that the writer of verse knew intuitively the strange, deep secret of him who held the brush: rather, he set himself to learn this,—to understand the *differences* as well as the *relationships* among the arts, to grasp the integral factors of each, by virtue of which each works “in a sad sincerity,” at heart one with all the rest, but each alone in its separate manifestation of Beauty.

Only by virtue of such a deep recognition as this can come the truest sympathy; and the sympathy of Browning with all other arts besides his own is deep and vital. As, when he speaks of music, he speaks from the musician’s standpoint, so also, when he lingers over a picture or touches the stones of architecture, he puts his ear close to the heart of him who wrought these works in the hot chambers of his special art. Many poets have contented themselves with appreciation of the literary quality in a painting, or with laying

stress on its historical value, or with praising or condemning it according as it fulfilled a poetic idea, so forever ignoring that central element which makes of a picture a work of art capable, in its own direction, of expressing what can be expressed by no other means whatever :—

“‘As like as a Hand to another Hand!’

Whoever said that foolish thing  
Could not have studied to understand

The counsels of God in fashioning,  
Out of the infinite love of his heart,  
This Hand whose beauty I praise, apart  
From the world of wonder left to praise,  
If I tried to learn the other ways,  
Of love in its skill or love in its power.

‘As like as a Hand to another Hand!’

Who said that never took his stand,  
Found, and followed, like me, an hour,  
The beauty in this — how free, how fine  
To fear almost! — of the limit line.

As I looked at this, and learned and drew,

Drew and learned and looked again,  
While fast the happy minutes flew,

Its beauty mounted into my brain,  
And a fancy seized me : I was fain

To efface my work, begin anew,  
Kiss before what I only drew ;

Ay, laying the red chalk 'twixt my lips,  
 With soul to help if the mere lips failed,  
 I kissed all right where the drawing ailed,—  
 Kissed fast the grace that somehow slips  
 Still from one's soulless finger-tips."

If, as has been said, this recognition of the arts, in the essential variety of their nature, gives the grace of true sympathy, so also it bestows the freedom which comes alone from knowledge; Browning, as we shall find, after he has with just discrimination given to each art its due, rises to another level, from which he sees them all in an orchestral unity, and in this larger mood defines the province not of the arts, but of *Art*:—

"Art remains the one way possible  
 Of speaking truth; . . .

. . . . .  
 . . . . .

. . . Art,— wherein man nowise speaks to men,  
 Only to mankind,— Art may tell a truth  
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.  
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth  
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—



So, note by note, bring music from your mind,  
Deeper than ever the Andante dived,—  
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.”

But, before bringing Browning as a witness to himself, let us endeavor to see how this sympathy and this freedom are expressed, under what varied forms throughout the length and breadth of his strenuous verse he establishes the right to be called a painter's poet.

Underlying all else, it must be remembered that dramatic poetry is of necessity nearest of kin to pictorial and plastic art, and that in Browning the dramatic quality of his verse brings him at once very close to those who are concerned with pictures. With him all is life, all is action : even with his most metaphysical imaginings there is blended actual human nature, surging with impulse, breathless with desire, or dumb with rage. His lyrics are woven of fiery threads : his idyls do not wander beyond the borders of an eager world, flushed with the morning's potency and restless with the passion of search ; all forming a body of dramatic verse of extraordinary and graphic power.

But besides this dramatic power, besides the fine energy which dominates him and gives a rugged fibre to every line he writes, there are also discoverable certain modes of de-

scription which, it seems to me, point unmistakably to the sympathetic recognition of other arts, and to their separate and special manner of expression. Indeed, if I were not afraid of seeming to push my point too far, I should almost be willing to suggest what special schools Browning had found most in harmony with his own art and most able to serve his own purposes. But, without dwelling upon these lesser points, it may be affirmed that his knowledge of painting is constantly perceptible in his treatment of his themes; and this, if there were nothing more, would entitle him to the claims made in his behalf. Let it be understood that I do not here refer to what is called in poetry "word-painting," — that exchange which is robbery and debases verse, where, by curious tricks of manner, lesser poets emulate the brush with a pen: — what I mean is something different from this, it is rather the large handling of the deep principles of composition and effect, not the use of mere adjuncts and superficialities.

Among a multitude of illustrations, one recalls the "Meeting at Night" as indicating with great felicity Browning's nearness to an artist's methods:—

"The gray sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon, large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap

In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed in the slushy sand.  
Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach ;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears ;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each."

Again, in "Love among the ruins"

"Now the single little turret that remains  
    On the plains,  
By the caper over-rooted, by the gourd  
    Over-scored,  
While the patching house-leek's head of blossom winks  
    Through the chinks :  
Marks the basement where a tower, in ancient time,  
    Sprang sublime,  
And a burning ring all round the chariots traced  
    As they raced,  
And the monarch and his minions and his dames  
    Viewed the games."

Or yet once more :—

“The year’s at the spring,  
 The day’s at the morn ;  
 Morning’s at seven ;  
 The hillside’s dew-pearled ;  
 The lark’s on the wing ;  
 The snail’s on the thorn :  
 God’s in his heaven,—  
 All’s right with the world.”

These lines and many more such as these illustrate the sympathetic relations of Browning’s verse to the arts ; but we must go further and see in what more palpable ways this is shown, and how those ways are to be defined.

We may at once indicate three distinct forms under which the poet writes his vision, maintains his insight into the world of Painting: 1. In perception of pictures ; 2. In a subtle understanding of the nature of the artist ; 3. In a profound recognition of the scope and meaning of this art.

In my brief paper, I can bring but few examples,—a quotation here or there to show the lines of search ; but you, who know the whole body of the Poems, will supply many others better fitted, I dare say, to the purpose than those which first occur to me, and which I quote here.

No one who had not known the painter’s way and felt

with the painter's art could have written "A Face," which is laid upon the page almost as if warm from the palette.

"If you could have that little head of hers  
Painted upon a background of pale gold,  
Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!  
No shade encroaching on the matchless mould  
Of those two lips, which should be opening soft  
In the pure profile; not as when she laughs,  
For that spoils all: but rather as if aloft  
Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's  
Burthen of honey-colored buds to kiss  
And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.  
Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,  
How it should waver, on the pale gold ground,  
Up to the fruit-shaped, perfect chin it lifts!  
I know, Correggio loves to mass, in rifts  
Of heaven, his angel faces, orb on orb  
Breaking its outline, burning shades absorb;  
But these are only massed there, I should think,  
Waiting to see some wonder momentarily  
Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky  
(That's the pale ground you'd see this sweet face by),  
All heaven, meanwhile, condensed into one eye  
Which fears to lose the wonder, should it wink."

Or the "Protus":—

“ Among the latter busts, we count by scores  
Half-emperors and quarter-emperors,  
Each with his bay-leaf fillet, loose-thonged vest,  
Loric and low-browed Gorgon on the breast,—  
One loves a baby face, with violets there,  
Violets instead of laurel in the hair,  
As those were all the little locks could bear.  
Now read here: “ Protus ends a period  
Of empery beginning with a god;  
Born in the porphyry chamber at Byzant,  
Queens by his cradle, proud and ministrant:  
And if he quickened breath there, ’twould like fire  
Pantingly through the dim vast realm transpire  
A fame that he was missing, spread afar:  
The world, from its four corners, rose in war,  
Till he was borne out on a balcony  
To pacify the world when it should see  
The captains ranged before him; one, his hand  
Made baby points at, gained the chief command.  
And day by day more beautiful he grew  
In shape, all said, in feature and in hue;  
While young Greek sculptors gazing on the child  
Became with old Greek sculpture reconciled.  
Already sages labored to condense  
In easy tomes a life’s experience:  
And artists took grave counsel to impart

In one breath and one hand-sweep all their art,—  
To make his graces prompt as blossoming  
Of plentifully-watered palms in spring :  
Since well beseems it, whoso mounts the throne,  
For beauty, knowledge, strength, should stand alone,  
And mortals love the letters of his name.”

And last : —

“That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now : Frà Pandolf’s hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will’t please you sit and look at her ? I said  
‘Frà Pandolf’ by design : for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I),  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there ; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not  
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek : perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, ‘Her mantle laps  
Over my lady’s wrist too much,’ or ‘Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat’ : such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere."

With the exploration of the artist himself Browning has been constantly occupied. In his weakness and in his strength, in strange, intimate corners of experience, and in the full light of art's highway, the poet has kept step with him, and asked of him his secrets. In that brilliant poem the "Old Painters in Florence" one finds a circle of painters, each brimming with impulse, each stung with a fine necessity, each fulfilling his vocation according to the greatness of his gift and the strength of his spiritual fibre. But we shall find the intimations of this poem wrought out with consummate care and fidelity in the "Andrea del Sarto," in "Fra Lippo Lippi," and many others. Indeed, as we study these, I doubt if anywhere we get a deeper insight into the life, the dreams, the successes, the failures, of him who works with the brush. We see Andrea equipped with the artist's temperament, with a marvellous facility, with emotions and sensibilities of a rare sort: he breathes the air of Florence, he is encompassed with sights and sounds friendly to his art,— he loves.



A few incomparably descriptive lines give us first the fair Tuscan environment in which life was lived in those days, and then reveal the intimacy of his home. Sitting with his wife's hand in his, speaking to her in half-happy, musing fashion, he tells unconsciously the true story of himself. As in a glass, Browning lets us see the unsuspected failure, lays bare to us the hidden, but none the less bitter, disloyalty of his life. For this first necessity of the artist lies, as it did with Saint Peter of old, in not being disobedient to the heavenly vision; and this true necessity of the soul faded in Andrea before the sordid demand for a lower pleasure, was overlaid by his fatuous affection for a selfish wife and for the dull luxuries which she craved. Born to a divine heritage, with the power to discern heavenly harmonies, called by the people of his day "the faultless painter," he would not stretch his wings for the far flight, but sat down with the little earthly perfection, so cheaply won, and was fain to be content. As he talks, half with his wife, but unconsciously more deeply with his own soul, we see how the glory slipped, how the flame died upon the altar. Andrea waited for another to gird him to the high emprise; and, when that hope failed, he failed also, and in accepting earth's guerdon missed the celestial. Content with the lower achievement, he did not throw himself upon the thorns of

discipline, and in the stress find facility deepen into power. Rather, contemplating serenely the rounded beauty of his wife and of his Madonnas, he failed to see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.

As Andrea sits and gazes into the mirror of his own life, there occurs the double tragical motive of his both accusing and excusing himself. At one instant, he exclaims:—

“Had the mouth but urged,  
 ‘God and the glory! never care for gain.  
 The present by the future, what is that?  
 Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!  
 Rafael is waiting: up to God all three!’”

Had he been thus urged, he might have done it. And, in the next moment, he drops into the slow apologetic key:—

“I regret little, I would change still less.  
 Since thus my past life lies, why alter it?”

The failure is not in failure’s self, but in Andrea’s sorry acquiescence in it; veritable dust to dust; a new soul’s tragedy.

With an equally deep recognition, Browning turns to Fra Lippo Lippi, the eager, hot, profligate little friar, a bundle of emotions caught away in the ignorance and want of his young life,—“all at eight years old,” he says,—out of

the wide, real world, and shut into convent walls, where his existence was a strange, sad mingling of impulse and penance; where Beauty, great, ineffable, waited upon his ardent sight; and where also, alas! the snatch of a rhyme or the tread of a woman's foot caught his unregenerate ear and lured him to pursuit.

“Flower o' the broom,  
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb.”

Woven of such threads, Fra Lippo illustrates with wonderful subtlety the range of that strange instrument, the artist, in whom perhaps as in no other are blended flesh and spirit in a tireless relationship,—sense and soul each essential to the painter's art, wherein form and color must make the vehicles of his truth, wherein what the body's eye sees must be the means of expression for what the soul's eye discerns.

By a paradox of existence, Browning would have us understand that the pursuit of art is the Artist's temptation, even as it is his reward; his danger as well as his safety, so that only sense purified can minister to the spirit's utmost need, be trusted to see

“The beauty and the wisdom and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,  
Changes, surprises,—and God made it all!”

Yet is this palpitating painter, this vagabondish friar, nearer to the kingdom than many another of his less offending brothers, full of the smug satisfactions of small success ; for there are deep perceptions in Fra Lippo's heart, and to him Beauty is "about the best thing God invents," while he perceives that Beauty reveals other secrets, must involve man's soul. And so, urged by these glorious intimations, though tangled in the rose-mesh of the lower nature, he would have been able to stand many spiritual tests ; would, we may believe, have known the saving joy of

"Finding it sweeter to be dead :  
To die for Beauty than to live for bread."

It would be interesting to add yet further witnesses to the truth of Browning's insight : the rare sweet pathos of the *Pictor Ignotus*, who lives and works in a minor key, in an untroubled obscurity, strong in his weakness ; the lesson learned by the young sculptor in "Pippa Passes" ; the intricate story of "Pacchiarotto,"—all these would enrich our study. But we must turn at this last moment to Browning's recognition of the Art of Painting itself. Woven in and out of the body of his verse, we find the depth and majesty of his conception. Painting, like the other arts, is everywhere a divine mission, an earnest quest. Man, the artist, is set to read a glorious message to a waiting world.

“God’s works : paint any one, and count it crime to let a truth slip.”

The terms of the problem, the factors in it, are the visible face of nature and the spirit of man, which, manifesting themselves in Art, are fused into a new product.

Looking forth upon the actual world of form and color, the artist re-creates, embodies truth afresh ; makes evident the Soul which moves through all things ; reveals the nature of things moving melodiously toward noble ends ; in a word, blends matter and spirit as they can be no otherwise blent, making of the Art of Painting yet one more revelation of the Beautiful and the True. This, and no less than this, is the province of painting to Robert Browning ; this is the “ancient doctrine, simple, earnest, true,”—supremely difficult, supremely beautiful, involving not alone a joyful activity, but the pale agony of ceaseless endeavor. The artist having seen and understood and felt, how shall he fashion a cup from which the wine of new truth may be fitly poured ? Neither does Browning fail to see that, for the fine fulfilment of this high function, it follows that certain conditions must be met. In what air, through what temper, by what method is Art’s secret revealed ? he further asks ; and to his sympathetic questions answers are not wanting. “Pure Art’s birth is still the Republic’s.” Under conditions where

simplicity and fraternity and freedom invite the soul's best powers ; where the individual is held most deeply responsible, and yet where the needs of all are kept dear to each, — where, in a word, "love is duty,"—this is the air, pure and sane, where Art must breathe freest and best thrive.

And for the temper? "A man's reach must exceed his grasp." It is the high aim and the attendant struggle, declares Browning, which alone will serve to pluck out the heart of Art's mystery. It was to this eternal necessity that Andrea was false,—the necessity of bringing the whole moral and spiritual strength of a man to its highest point, in order that he may be able to discern the word of truth.

Remembering this, it need not be said that a work of art should be moral: the moral element is inherent in it, must be present wherever truth and beauty are the test of existence.

Once more, what of the method of Art? Perhaps nowhere is Browning more explicit than in his assertion regarding the *manner* of the artist's search. Through representation of the individual, he must find the type ; must work through things to the heart of things, through the actual to the real. In one sense, indeed, it may be said that it is impossible to separate the matter and manner of Painting ; for they are one.

In style, which has been called Art itself, there is found the rendering forth of truth in large typical form; the assertion through shifting shapes of the permanent and the immanent, the manifestation by the hand of genius of that which the actual could not convey,—a glory revealed on some Mount of Transfiguration, whereby, as Browning himself says, in a rare definition,—

“Out of three sounds he framed, not a fourth sound, but a star.”

At a time when modern criticism is occupied with new and surprising doctrines,—when Philistines rage at sentiment, and the people vainly imagine that a false realism can make true art,—there is something very tonic in the sturdy inflexibility of Browning on this question of the artist's attitude toward the ideal. His conviction first made plain in “Paracelsus” he reiterates in the great body of his verse so packed with passion, knowledge, and aspiration, until in the “Parleyings” he flings one more substantial anchor forth, crying:—

“Bounteous God,  
Deviser and dispenser of all gifts  
To soul through sense,—in Art the soul uplifts  
Man's best of thanks! What but Thy measuring-rod

Meted forth heaven and earth? more intimate  
Thy very hands were busied with the task  
Of making, in this human shape, a mask —  
A match for that divine. Shall love abate  
Man's wonder? Nowise! True — true — all too true —  
No gift but, in the very plenitude  
Of its perfection, goes maimed  
By wickedness or weakness: still, some few  
Have grace to see Thy purpose, strength to mar  
Thy work by no admixture of their own.  
Limn truth not falsehood, bid us love alone  
The type untampered with, the naked star!"

This brief commentary on so long a theme must end here, when scarcely begun; but, as we go, there comes an echo from the early world, and once more we see the far Olympus where withdrawn the gods abide, and where sit those to whom the arts are committed. Grave, serene, they watch across the sky a strenuous company, Musicians, Painters, Poets, working out the world-themes according to the form allotted to each art. Much is wasted labor, much is mistaken energy, much is broken law; but forever on all, where the true "rose of beauty burns," Time sets a seal, and Memory, the mother, gathers them in her breast.



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